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AUTHOR Hennig, Kenneth R., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

A study examined student writing from the point of view of each of three language functions: the expressive function (the evidence of the individual writer), the appeal function (evidence of a particular listener or audience), and the representative function (attention to the topic). While speaking, students have a clear sense of the three functions of language. On the other hand, when students write, they are on less familiar ground. Samples of writing--personal journals, letter writing, and topic-centered essays--were gathered from 20 community college freshmen. From these samples, 80 t-units of each of the three types of writing were selected. Syntactic structures were analyzed to determine syntactic differences among the three sample groups. Results indicated differences mainly between the topic-centered essays and the journals and letters, with the essay writing being more complex. (HOD)

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SYNTACTIC VARIATION AND THE FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE

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by
Kenneth R. Hennig, Jr.
Professor of English
Niagara County Community College
3111 Saunders Settlement Road
Sanborn, New York 14132

(716) 731-3271
Ext. 154

CS206332

SYNTACTIC VARIATION AND THE FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE

In any act of writing there are three key factors: someone is writing, someone will read, and something is being written about. This report identifies some linguistic variables that are associated with each of those three factors.

However obvious this opening statement may seem, there are, in our academic traditions, a number of powerful, yet subtle forces that tend to separate writers from themselves and from their readers.

Most writing experiences directed by schools and colleges emphasize a specific topic, i.e. the instructor tells the student what to write about. These topics range from descriptions of things and experiences (My Pet, My Summer Vacation) to opinions about political and social questions to themes in literature. However, these topic-oriented writing assignments are seldom written to anyone. Even the teacher is not a real audience. The message rarely involves him; he is not referred to directly, and he isn't expected to respond except by evaluating. This absence of a real audience in school writing ruptures the communication process, a process which always

occurs with a speaker/writer, an audience, and a subject. The audience, at least to some degree, is absent, and as a result, the student writer is attempting to write effectively without one of the three basic guides to effectiveness.

In contrast to school writing experiences, when the students begin to use writing for their own needs, they almost always have a specific audience, usually a friend. For example, teenage friendships and romances are nearly always characterized by ritualized passing of notes.

Writing for personal needs differs from school writing both in the writer's sense of audience and in the writer's sense of self. In writing that a person initiates as in conversation, the writer makes a conscious attempt to show his or her personality--sense of humor, sincerity, or sexuality. Quite the opposite is expected of most school writing: the student writer is often discouraged from showing a personal style and is encouraged to sound impersonal and official.

Martin Joos (1961) sees formality in language in a continuum of style ranging from what he calls frozen to formal to consultative to casual and intimate. His terms are useful in describing school writing which is characterized by the frozen and formal styles.

> ". . . formal style is strictly determined by the absence of participation from the listener. This absence infects the speaker also. He may speak as if he were not present, avoiding such allusions to his own existence as 'I, me, mine,' with the possible exception of 'one' . . . the speaker protects both the text and himself from involvement, presumably he will be absent if the roof collapses." (p. 36)

If the writer loses the sense of audience, the writing becomes vague and uncertain and the message becomes a weak, colorless, all purpose message. John Dixon (1967) sees school writing not as a separate subject, but as an integral part of all the interaction that occurs with learning. "Effective speech is learnt not in front of audiences who are only to be conjured in the imagination--the dummy run approach--but in preparation for saying something of significance to real audiences." (p. 35)

Of the three basic aspects of any writing situation--writer, reader, and subject--two are severely de-emphasized in most school writing. Only the topic remains, floating in a void separated from the speaker and the audience.

Probably the earliest work describing the linguistic factors of speaker, listener and topic come from the Prague School of the 1930's. This school of Functional Linguistics was explained by Paul L. Garvin (1969):

> In order to understand the function of language as a tool it must be viewed in terms of the three basic factors of the speech situation in which it is used: the speaker, the hearer, and the things... that are talked about. The linguistic sign is correlated to the speaker, it is correlated to the objects and states of facts talked about. "Correlation" here means that if there is any variation introduced in the speaker, the linguistic sign will vary correspondingly; likewise if there is any variation introduced in the hearer, the linguistic sign will vary; and states of fact talked about, the linguistic sign will vary with it... The correlation between sign and speaker is the expressive function; the correlation between sign and the hearer is the appeal function; and the correlation between the sign and the state of facts talked about is the representative function." (p. 231)

This functional view of language can be applied to writing. Of course, the speaker becomes the writer; the hearer becomes the reader.

None of these three functions can be isolated in a single piece of writing. Any act of writing is performing several functions at once. This study examines student writing from the point of view of of each of three functions: The expressive function (the evidence of the individual writer), the appeal function (evidence of a particular listener or audience) and the representative function (attention to the topic). This study looks at writing, not as it differs from one student to another, but as it differs from situation to situation in which one of these three functions is dominant.

While speaking, students have a clear sense of the three functions of language. They have a sense of the language style that they use comfortably and fluently; they know exactly who the audience is, and the subject is usually shared by all the members of the conversation group. On the other hand, when students write, they are on less familiar ground.

The student writer faces the task of writing with a distorted view of his or her place in the writing process and of the place of the reader.

Design of the Study

The first task was to gather samples of writing that emphasize one of the functions over the other two. This was done by forming three sample categories: personalized journals, letter writing, and topic-centered essays. These three categories correspond to the three basic functions of language. The journal emphasizes the expressive function; the letter writing, the appeal function; and the essays, the representative function. In the journal, the writer was encouraged to focus his writing on his experiences, his perceptions, and his opinions in a style that is comfortable for him. He was encouraged to express himself; the pronoun, I, naturally reoccurred frequently. In the letter writing, the writer

was encouraged to appeal to a specific audience. The pronoun, you, then reoccurred frequently. In topic-centered essays, the writer referred to a specific subject. One of the pronouns, it, he, they, or one, reoccurred frequently.

The subjects for this study were twenty freshman students who were enrolled in freshman English classes at Niagara County Community College, a comprehensive community college which includes liberal arts and career programs. The subjects of this study were selected randomly from several classes. They represented a range of abilities and curricula. Twelve were liberal arts students and eight were career students. Four graduated with honors; five didn't graduate.

The course emphasized writing for a variety of purposes. Each of the students wrote a number of formal essays in which the topic was assigned, e.g. they wrote a paper explaining what kinds of responsibilities or privileges mark adulthood in our society. The students kept a personalized journal in which they were encouraged to write about their own experiences and their reaction to those experiences in a style that was comfortable for them. The journals were not graded. In addition to the essays and journals, each student was assigned an

unknown correspondent in another class. The two correspondents would, using code names, write to each other, exchanging letters through the instructor.

Each of the twenty student writers submitted samples of letters, journals and essays. From these samples, eighty T-Units of each of the three types were selected. Each eighty T-Unit sample was drawn from at least two separate pieces of writing. In all cases the beginning T-Units of a particular piece of writing were used for the analysis.

The syntactic structures of the three discourse types were analyzed and compared on the basis of Kellogg Hunt's T-Unit (1965) which is "one main clause with all the subordinate clauses attached to it." (p. 20). In this study the writings were analyzed not to determine syntactic growth, as in Hunt's study, but to determine syntactic differences among the three sample groups. The analysis was concerned not only with the length but with the composition of the T-Unit. The analysis compared fourteen syntactic variables, most of which are standard recognized forms. However, two types of noun substitutes have been counted. Noun substitutes showing complexity are those which form the subject, object, or predicate nominative of a T-Unit. The noun substitutes following "I think" or "I feel" are not of the same

type. The "I think" places the clause that follows in a tentative state. "I think" functions in much the same way as perhaps, or possibly.

I think the weather will improve.
Perhaps the weather will improve.

The syntactic variables:

1. T-Unit length
2. Number of noun substitutes showing complexity (A)
3. Number of noun substitutes following "I think" or "I feel" beginnings (B)
4. Length of noun substitutes showing complexity (A)
5. Length of noun substitutes following "I think" or "I feel" beginnings (B)
6. Single word adjectives
7. Adjectival clauses
8. Number of coordinations within T-Units
9. Length of coordinations within T-Units
10. Initial free modifiers
11. Medial free modifiers
12. Final free modifiers
13. Single word adverbs
14. Adverbial clauses

MEANS FOR FOURTEEN SYNTACTIC MEASURES
IN ESSAYS, JOURNALS, AND LETTERS

	T-Unit Length	No. Noun Subst. A	No. Noun Subst. B	Length Noun Subst. A	Length Noun Subst. B	Single Wd. Adjective	Adjective Clause
Essay	15.72	21.30	7.25	8.89	11.75	74.55	12.95
Journal	11.93	12.45	9.30	8.51	7.62	54.65	8.35
Letter	10.07	13.00	10.05	6.59	7.77	38.80	5.15

	No. T-Unit Co-ordin	Length T-Unit Co-ordin	Initial Free Mod	Medial Free Mod	Final Free Mod	Single Wd. Adverb	Adverb Clause
Essay	32.20	8.58	14.30	4.40	5.30	30.60	16.35
Journal	20.05	8.54	13.20	2.85	7.65	34.85	14.75
Letter	8.35	7.89	9.40	1.40	7.25	31.65	12.00

RESULTS

1. T-Unit Length

The mean length of T-Units was much longer in essay writing than either letter writing or journal writing. The mean number of words per T-Unit in essays was 15.72, in journals 11.93 and in letters 10.07.

2. Number and Length of Noun Substitutes

The number of noun substitutes expressing complexity (noun substitute A) were significantly more common in essay writing. The mean number of noun substitutes showing complexity (A) in essays were 21.30, in letters 13.00, and in journals 12.45. Similar to T-Unit length, the number of noun substitutes A and journals was very close (13.0 and 12.45). The sharp difference between those two means and the essay mean suggests that, in effect, there are only two modes of difference in these variables: topic-centered essays and personal writing (letter and journal).

The difference in number of noun substitutes following "I think" or "I feel" phrases (Noun Substitute B) were not as sharply different as noun substitutes showing complexity (Noun Substitute A). The mean number of noun substitutes B were 10.05 in the letters, 9.30 in the journals, and 7.25 in the essays.

3. Number and Length of Intra-T-Unit Co-ordination

The number of intra-T-Unit co-ordinations was most frequent in essay writing, but the most striking difference among the three discourse types was the low mean in letter writing. The number of T-Unit co-ordinations in the essay was 22.20, in the journal 20.05, in the letter only 8.35. The low mean in the letter writing indicates a general lack of detail and thematic development in letters. The students often seemed to be groping for something to say in letters. Occasionally phrases like, "Well, I don't know what else to say," or "That's all I have to say" would appear in letters.

4. Modifiers

Seven different types of modification were measured: Single word adjectives, adjectival clauses, single word adverbs, adverbial clauses and initial, medial and final free modifiers. In five of these seven categories, the highest frequency of modification was in the topic-centered essays. Only in the final free modifiers and single word adverb was the highest frequency in another discourse type - the journal writing. The most striking contrast between means of modifying forms was in single word adjectives. The number of single word adjectives in essays was 74.55, in journals 54.65, and in letters 38.80. Single word adjectives are the most common

form of modification in all types of writing. The next most common form was single word adverbs which occurred with only half the frequency of adjectives.

It's not surprising that adverbs were most common in journal writing because journals describe more action than either topic-centered essays or letters. Journals usually read something like a story, and, of course, modification of verbs and adverbs would be the dominant form of detail.

The mean number of single word adverbs was 34.85 in journals, 31.65 in the letters, and 30.60 in the essays.

Conclusions

Clearly there are syntactic differences among the three forms of discourse, but mainly between the topic-centered essays, on one hand, and the journals and letters, on the other. Essay writing is more complex than the other two modes. However, any English teacher might have guessed that. The significance of this study is that it sheds some light on the specific nature of that complexity. However, it would be a mistake to assume that complexity in writing is completely desirable. Complexity may well be tangled and convoluted; simplicity can be direct, forceful, and even artful. As the student

writer approaches the task of writing either an essay, a journal or a letter, he brings a different set of attitudes to each, and also he must employ somewhat different linguistic skills. The essay samples were the most distinctive of the three types, standing apart from the other two types in syntax.

The essay is more oriented to ideas and less personal. This study shows that writing about an idea leads the writer into certain syntactic forms that are tied to the idea that they carry. In an essay, the writer talks about, not simply a person or a place, but rather a concept and variations on that concept. To make a statement about a concept, and especially a variation on a concept, the writer has a strong tendency to use noun substitutes, either a clause or a phrase. It's hard to imagine how the idea below could be expressed in one sentence without the use of noun substitutes.

> It is apparent <u>that the Nixon administration has not been either of these things to the people</u>.

A less skillful writer could have communicated the same idea in the first example using two sentences.

> The Nixon administration has not been either of these to the people. This is apparent.

Not surprising, the essay samples, with their greater concern with subject and idea, contained almost twice as many noun substitutes as either the letters or the journals.

As the writer refined or elaborated on a particular idea, he tended to use more adjective clauses. For example, the concept of roles is refined by an adjective clause in the following sentence.

> The roles that people play in society are numerous.

Accordingly, adjective clauses were much more prevalent in essay writing. The linguistic resources that a writer draws upon are determined by the purpose of his writing. Obviously, the writer will draw from a different well of words as he writes about economics than he would were he writing about education. A similar change occurs in the structure of his language. The writing emphasizing the representative function draws from a different syntactic well than writing emphasizing the appeal function.

The student who is developing his skill in writing essays, as opposed to other modes of discourse, needs to be taught how to form certain syntactic patterns effectively. Specifically he needs practice and guidance in forming noun clauses and phrases.

Specifically designed sentence combining activities can be helpful. Because immature writers are not skillful or comfortable in using noun substitutes, they often lean heavily on sentences beginning with the word, this. This, used without a noun following, generally refers back to what has been said in the preceding sentence. The results of this lack of syntactic skill is repetition of simple sentences. These repetitious sentence patterns can often be combined with the preceding sentence by using a noun substitute.

Two sentences: She followed me to the coffee room during my break. This really bothered me.

Noun substitute: Her following me to the coffee room during my break really bothered me.

The inability to skillfully and readily form noun substitutes often leads the student to wordy constructions using the fact that ...

Wordy: I think that the fact that I've heard her use such harsh words to her friends upsets me the most.

Noun substitute: Hearing her use such harsh words to her friends upset me the most.

The recent rush to learn sentence combining in the potentially mindless imitation of a mature style could be refined by applying some aspects of this study. The complexity of syntax in essays is not random; it is related to the dominant function of the writing and it follows predictable patterns. As students shift from the familiar, informal style of journals and letters, they need to learn a more skillful use of noun substitutes (phrases and clauses). They need to learn when co-ordinations within T-Units are appropriate. In short, it's not enough just to teach students to write longer T-Units. They need to learn specific kinds of constructions that are appropriate for their purpose.

Finally what this study points to is the awareness that writing is not just writing. Writing for a particular purpose demands skills that are unique to that purpose. Further, those skills are producing particular syntactic formations.

A student, disappointed in his lack of success in writing an essay, said, "I can write well when it's something I like to write about." Behind this statement is the difference between writing with the expressive function dominant and writing with representative function dominant.

The writer, the reader, and the topic are key concepts within the system of written communication, and they only have full significance when they are integrated into a complete act of communication.

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